

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 541

EC 111 942

AUTHOR Kaliski, Lotte
TITLE A Theatre Workshop for Children with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acting; *Drama Workshops; *Learning Disabilities; Program Descriptions; *Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

The paper describes a theater workshop for children with learning disabilities, and discusses its benefits, including improved oral and written language, self esteem, and self control. Comments of actors involved in the workshop are included. (CL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

- ED158541

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

A THEATRE WORKSHOP FOR CHILDREN
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

BY

Jotte Kaliski

Founder & Senior Consultant

THE KALISKI SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

1250 Independence Avenue

Riverdale, New York 10471

Presented at the First World Congress

on Future Special Education

Stirling, Scotland

June 25 - July 1, 1978

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C.E.C.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM "



EC111942

A THEATRE WORKSHOP FOR CHILDREN

WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Lotte Kaliski

Special Medium - Communication

Perceptual Stimulations, Cognitive Skills

Age Range 6 to 17 years

SUMMARY

Theatre, in conjunction with THE YOUNG PEOPLES' THEATRE, an Equity Company. A new dimension in the curriculum for Children With Learning Disabilities. Children's Theatre for Children with Dyslexia or with Learning Disabilities have therapeutic effects in manifold ways. It serves to alleviate deficiencies in the dyslexic or L.D. child's body image, in visual - auditory - vocal - tactile perception, in visuo - motor coordination, in temporal - spatial orientation, in sequencing, in directionality. Acting in the Children's Theatre is an excellent and exciting medium to further communication skills in both receptive and expressive language. Role playing stresses reality concepts and, yet provides opportunities for development of imagination.

Acting in the Children's Theatre is a learning experience. However, it is not based on notebook, workbook, text book skills. It is a living experience for the child, creative, improvised and, yet structured commensurate with our philosophy: "Learning by Living in a Structured Setting".

The outcome of the Theatre Workshop shows acceleration of cognitive skills, i.e. surprising strides in short and long term memory, in factual

knowledge, in perception of environment, in social sciences, in manipulative skills (by making scenery and props), in stimulation and heightening the sense of color and form. Improvement of coordination thru movement, music, rhythm and dance.

Emotional growth is manifested in better self-esteem, self-confidence and desirable peer relationships. It also shows closer relationships between the children, the teachers and the actors of The Young Peoples' Theatre. A true team spirit electrifies the entire School.

Role playing has a positive impact on concentration, attention span, reasoning and judgement; it contributes to diminish hyperactivity as well as passivity.

A Theatre Workshop in a School for Children With Learning Disabilities has the great advantage that it cuts across age groups. It brings about identification of the older children with the younger ones and vice versa. It is non-competitive, each child wants the other one to succeed.

The Theatre Workshop is an unchartered road toward achievement. It calls for the explorer and artist in the special educator to delve into many unknown regions of the special child's makeup. It opens up new facets of the child's personality and, incidentally, it often has a positive effect on parents who discover new insights into their children. Teachers and actors alike find out about family relationships and other environmental influences on the child which we might never have been able to assess were it not for that particular medium of Theatre and Role Playing.

The fact that The Kaliski School Theatre Workshop exists in conjunction with The Young Peoples' Theatre adds an unusual note to the children's experiences. The children are enthusiastic about their contacts with "real actors". Often the actors become the children's models and idols. That is a living experience, an out of the ordinary daily life experience for the child. Their hero is not just portrayed via television or movies. The Theatre Workshop creates and conveys the magic of a different layer of the child's world.

A THEATRE WORKSHOP AT THE KALISKI SCHOOLS
FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

"MARY"

16 Years Old

A passive, introverted personality. A young girl without laughter and joy. Her movements - indistinct; her reaction - negative.

I have worked with her for a number of years and had no response - only the whispered words "No - let me out".

And suddenly - a change. The Kaliski School started work with The Young People's Theatre Group and slowly Mary became interested and opened up.

There is still very little talk, no outward enthusiasm. But group participation. The wish to be included. The wish to assert herself.

The combined effort of school, dramatic and dance activities, the praise for accomplished work, the interest, encouragement and love of her teachers have helped Mary to become more sure of herself. It has shown us, her teachers, how to reach her and slowly bring her out of her shell .

Those are the words of Ellen Lee, chairperson of our Dance Department, so vividly describing the reaction personified in one girl when participating in

THE KALISKI SCHOOL THEATRE WORKSHOP IN CONJUNCTION WITH
THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S THEATRE. (DIRECTOR, MARJORIE SIGLEY).

Why Theatre by Children with Learning Disabilities?

Theatre is a new dimension in the curriculum for L.D. Children. It faces up to our children's deficits. It taps resources in L.D. Children which very often are unknown to us. It can be therapeutic in alleviating

deficiencies in body image, in visual-auditory-vocal-tactile perception, in visuo-motor coordination and, large-small muscular coordination, time-spatial orientation, in sequencing, in directionality. Role playing can have a positive impact on growth in oral and written language including articulation, on concentration, span of attention, memory, reasoning and judgement, diminishing hyperactivity as well as passivity, raising the threshold of frustration, eliminating perseveration, on developing desirable peer relationships, reducing social incompatibility and increasing social competence. It enhances a sense of responsibility towards others. A Theatre Workshop has the great advantage in a school for L.D. Children that it cuts across age groups, it brings about identification of the older children with the younger ones and vice versa. It is non-competitive, each child wants the other one to "succeed".

Our Children's Theatre also contributes to various facets of the academic area. For instance, "Journey Into Shapes" enhanced comprehension of geometry at various levels while another theatre workshop increased awareness of the environment and in particular, of ecology.

The Theatre Workshop is an uncharted road toward achievement. It calls for the explorer and artist in the special educator to delve into many unknown regions of the special child's makeup. It opens up new facets of the child's personality, and, incidentally, it often has a positive effect on parents who discover new insights into their children. Teachers and actors alike find out about family relationships and other environmental influences on the child which we might never have been able to assess were it not for that particular medium of theatre and role playing.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Theatre Workshop is the beneficial effect on the children's emotional-social growth. It is beautifully expressed in Ellen Lee's words in regard to Mary.

It is fair to state that the majority of L.D. Children show "an emotional overlay" in addition to the before mentioned deficits. Role playing is an extension and expansion of the child's ego, he/she play himself and yet portrays someone else with whom he fully identifies. It is a unique personal experience. It raises the individual child's self esteem and self worth. For the moment at least the full identification with the role offers the child a release from himself. The child is no longer burdened with the image of his "every day self", which is not always conducive to happiness and peace of mind. On the contrary, the L.D. Child often is an individual struggling against odds in comprehending the world around him, conforming to family and school demands. However, role playing gives the child the opportunity to create a new self with new thoughts, with new skills and with different emotions.

Acting in The Kaliski School Children's Theatre is a learning experience. It is not, however, based on notebook, workbook, textbook skills. It is a living experience for the child, commensurate with The Kaliski School's philosophy.

LEARNING BY LIVING IN A STRUCTURED SETTING

The structured Setting in this case is original, creative, but set within certain limits as will be described later. The child's self involvement in theatre counteracts the passivity observed in the daily lives of many children when watching television shows. Moreover,

The Kaliski School Children's Theatre is child centered. The contents are the real world but, within the child's realm of interest and understanding. It is not a "miniature adult world".

The continuity of a Theatre Workshop throughout a school year enhances the benefits for the children all around. The actors and teachers become more proficient in their awareness of the individual child's strong points, potentials and weaknesses, of their emotional fragility, of their patterns of interaction. The Theatre is a mobilizing force in relieving known and unknown skills, feelings and emotions in individual children. Group dynamics play a motivational and educational role. The interplay of the children's emotions and reactions to each other and to the adults are an intangible product and cannot be measured by scientific devices.

Children's Theatre requires and is an incentive to team work. Each one is needed and each one has a place in the scheme of things. No matter how small a task, it must be performed and some child is needed to participate to the best of his ability. Team work teaches values. Speaking, gesturing are as important as drawing a curtain, painting props, helping with costumes, etc.

The medium of the theatre is an invaluable avenue of learning, a source of unusual experiences and a channel toward adaptive behavior (which sometimes carries over into daily life). The promise of approval and success is inherent in these particular learning experiences and is an emotional boon to the individual child.

Participation in the Children's Theatre requires considerable concentration and it lengthens the span of attention. L.D. Children become

remarkably observant and perceptive. It has been our experience that regardless of age children learn the parts of others. That applies to spoken lines, actions, gestures, movements, melodies, rhythms. Thus, one child can easily substitute for another one if and when the need arises. It is amazing to note that, even after years, after one particular performance, the majority of the children can just get "on stage" and perform regardless of whether that particular role they chose was their own at the previous performance.

The strides in long and short term memory has been a source of amazement to the staff of The Kaliski School. One of our staff members emphatically stated at a staff meeting, which centered around the evaluation of The Kaliski School Theatre Workshop, that he found the children's ability to memorize every line of the dialogue of the entire play absolutely astounding. He questioned why is it that the children's memory is so remarkable in the theatre and why do we so often have so much trouble with memorizing multiplication tables? What is the answer? The force of motivation? Or are there other factors we cannot determine at this point? To arrive at an answer may require a study and it might be very worthwhile to undertake research with that objective in mind.

The Children's Theatre creates and conveys the magic of a different layer of the child's world. It is real and yet imaginary, it is structured and yet flexible, it sets limits and yet gives freedom to the individual for expression. It is educational and yet for the child that aspect is unnoticeable. It is a different facet of education. The child-centered Children's Theatre makes use of topics from the environment, from academic subjects, from history and geography that lend

themselves to dramatic representation. Actually there is very little that does not, when suggested to children. The learning process is vitalized and dramatized through conscious experiences of the senses - so important in the remediation of L.D. Children frequently encountered imperceptions. Seeing, hearing, feeling, doing a recontinuously reinforced in role playing. The inter-relationship of contents and topics of theatre with the child's world in school and environment is invaluable for the child's comprehension and enjoyment. It is exemplified in one of our plays "Journey Into Shapes". The world is made up of shapes. The exploration and definition of shapes around us, the perceptual training and classes in geometry all become related to theatre. Size, form, color pertaining to props, sets and costumes lend the artistic touch to the entity.

Through real world Children's Theatre L.D. Children learn facts, they learn the need for and become more proficient in reasoning and judgment. Through the process of acting together in a meaningful way L.D. Children learn to see the relationship of cause and effect.

Children's Theatre can be a very helpful tool in tackling L.D. Children's oral and written language problems. The structure of language becomes more meaningful to the children in the context of a play. It becomes necessary and less of a chore to the individual child to use the proper syntax. Children learn differentiation of language when personifying different characters, i.e., a doctor's vocabulary and inflections are different from those of a sanitation worker. Deficiencies in articulation, such as omissions, substitutions, additions, volume, rate, phrasing

can be dealt with more effectively if the child sees an immediate goal and reason to work at those problems.

Spatial orientation, sequencing, the sense of directionality and body image can improve through participation in the Children's Theatre Workshop. Children "learn by doing", in this case, by "acting". They learn the need for recognition of space. It requires both the comprehension of the spatial vocabulary "in front of", "in back of", "behind", "beside", etc. and movement coordinated with action. The need for proper application of the directions "left" and "right" in regard to their own bodies, in relation to other actors, and in relation to the various parts of the stage becomes obvious to children. Dances also bring about an improved sense of direction of awareness of various parts of the body and of sequence of movement.

Self control evolves on stage. Children learn to express feelings, moods and thoughts through movement, facial expression and verbalization.

Ever since its inception in 1947, The Kaliski School For Children With Learning Disabilities considered dramatics, music, rhythms and movement of invaluable therapeutic effect on L.D. Children. Those subjects (if we want to call them that) are not thought of as an addition to or so called enrichment of the curriculum for L.D. Children but rather a necessity. Inasmuch as adults as well as children show individual differences in their mental, emotional, physical, cultural make-ups, they show varying native abilities, varying interests in any number of areas which must be recognized and utilized. Expression in various artistic forms can be developed in all children and, as pointed out above, it can

contribute greatly to a reduction of the L.D. Child's deficiencies. Moreover, expression in an artistic medium provides emotional gratification for practically every child.

The initial meeting between the actors and the students takes place in a theatre-like setting. The performance by the actors lays the foundation and leads into the play which will be conceived and performed by the students at a future date.

Following the play the actors meet with the students and discuss the play. At the same time they go through a series of exercises which allows the actor in charge to determine the students' abilities. The exercises include various body movement, a series of improvised short plays, etc.

While the exercises are taking place, ideas for the follow-up play are gathered. These ideas are drawn directly from the students through the process of suggestion, and are based on a theme that was originally suggested by the actors in their play. The ideas are then used and put together in such a way that they make sense and form a story. All ideas by the students are accepted, as each child makes his contribution. But, not all ideas are used. The final script is edited by the actor in charge and incorporated. Most, but not all the ideas which were obtained through the various skits and exercises, are used.

The working relationship between children in a group is close. They seem much more tolerant of each other and generally form a team-like spirit. Antagonistic behavior, which is often exhibited in the classroom, occurs less within the theatre group. Generally everyone is tolerant and is able to laugh at each others' mistakes.

Marjorie Sigley, the director of YPT, gives an outline of their approach: "Your children need control all the way. We must set limits. We present certain ideas to the children which release energies. Take the idea - What is shape? The children sit or stand facing me. A specific space is assigned to each child, with a chair in the middle of that space. Each child has the freedom to do what he/she wants to do within the limits of his particular space, only concentrating on him/herself. The others, at this point, are anonymous. I use non-verbal language - (One finger) means "stand up". (Two fingers) - "sit on chair". (Three fingers) - "sit on floor". (Hold up hand) - "means stop".

The only piece of furniture is a chair. Then two chairs. We put those chairs into various positions, such as facing each other, back to back, along side each other, etc. We discuss: Where do we find chairs in those respective positions? In a plane, in a hotel lobby, at a desk, etc. When? i.e., during rush hour in a subway train. What happens? (Action). If, for instance, there are only 2 seats but 3 children - conflict arises - and action takes place. Physical violence is not permitted. Arguments, however, are alright. Then - improvisation, verbalization follow.

The next step is working in two's. "All children in the group "perform" at the same time. If two work particularly well I have them perform for the others. I lead the children into making choices regarding verbalizations. The theatre allows everybody to be anybody anywhere, anytime."

Sigi continues: "The 5 basic elements of the Children's Theatre are: Who, What, Where, When, Why? The script grows out of describing characters.

Children learn to handle cut-out shapes in color. What does a large orange circle remind you of? - The Sun. A small orange circle? - A Life Saver. Then, progress to two or three shapes. Children learn to handle different shapes and sizes in a responsible way. From that you go on to combinations of different shapes. For instance, semi-circle and triangle - "I am a Sailboat" and, then, weave it into a story. This is an example of how to train the children visually. It may be necessary for the children to face each other in order to perceive what the combination of shapes is supposed to be. In order to produce sound images I will write on the blackboard words such as "splash, punch", etc. The children sound out these words and learn to perceive the action quality that goes with them. In order to get the children to comprehend the differences of the words and action inherent in push and pull certain sounds were associated with them, such as tic-ta-tic ... and t-sh t-sh ... respectively. Or, the child will stand in the center of a circle, without moving, except one arm, and he/she will say: punch. Here we have coordination of movement, "sound and word".

Comments by some of the actors who work with the children (age range: 6-17) - Again in connection with JOURNEY INTO SHAPES: "we did various pre-exercises involving the large and small muscles of the body. We formed angular and curved shapes. Since the source of all shapes is in air, on land, and in the water JOURNEY INTO SHAPES was cast at three

different levels: in space, on land and in the sea. Each group developed a scene around the respective region. We determined the basic shapes of fish, sea shells, etc. We acted out fish, we talked about emotions of shapes. For instance: how does it feel to be a triangle, a rectangle? The children defined personalities in relation to shapes, for instance: a circle - easy going, a triangle - cute, happy, a rectangle - a regular guy, a semi-circle - jolly, a line - direct, and a square - of course is a square.

Some of the basic exercises included the imagery of fire. The children pantomimed, closed their eyes, said - Fire. They associated visually auditorally; tactily. They built an imaginary campfire.

Concerning specific gains of the group or individual children, the actors continued: "The improvement in oral expression skills is tremendous. The opportunity to develop the individual child's assets or to counteract certain trends is great. For instance - to get Johnny away from TV commercials and to have him be himself is possible. Billy, who is obsessed with science fiction, can be channelized to be somebody real (the mayor). Tom pretends to be very unemotional but, actually, he is extremely vulnerable, he can assume a role and not be afraid to express his feelings".

Comments by Ellen Lee. Dance Department: "With dance, rhythm and movement we can contribute to mental health of our children. The special child lives with extremes. Hyperactive, noisily wild or inactive - quietly shy, bored or embarrassed by physical movement. Not used to stability and continuity.

A session will always start with talk. A few personal words to release tension. Certain words in our conversation give us a clue to the importance of our body control and emotion in action (chin up, - be on your toes, - no backbone, - stiff-necked, - tight fist, and so on).

To dance, to mime, to dramatize, to simplify, to act. Use every minute to get the child involved. From my own experience I know how gratifying it is to perform in front of an audience. While working with rhythmic body action the child can learn to express feeling, can share in human relationships, increase personal self-esteem develop a more realistic concept of his/her body and, through all of these can achieve some feeling of harmony and balance".

One of the teachers was particularly impressed with the children's improved concept of sequencing regarding both dialogue and action. The children were immediately aware of missing lines, gestures or action and would call those to the teacher's attention or, just take it upon themselves to fill in. It was further reported that in some groups certain children respected certain classmates more on the stage than in the classroom.

Comments by some of the participating children (spontaneous, original, uncorrected): "S. I like theatre because it is fun to act with the actors. It is a lot of fun being with them and you learn a lot of things about theatre". "R. Theatre is alright. I have been on stage before, but I only danced. I never spoke on stage until the play I did with my friend. I was really nervous about the whole thing, but I like to see other people perform on stage, but I like dancing the best since I used to dance a lot." "O. My first comment is that I think students who like theatre can

participate and those who don't like it don't do it. My second comment is to get experience with the actors. My third comment is that our Student Council should make a Theatre Club."

Individual case descriptions by actors:

By Hal, YPT actor: "Peter is one of the three quiet students in a class with a number of hyper-active children. As I presented exercises to stimulate imagination and communication, the group response was exhilarated and uncontrolled. It was difficult to be aware of Peter's work. Surrounded by the electric energy of his classmates he seemed to be uninterested and unresponsive. But as I became familiar with the group I began to see that he had perfect comprehension and was reaching for recognition. But he failed to manifest any of his responses.

In one of our class exercises we created an imaginary campfire. It started with the warmth of the fire, then came the hot dogs, then the horse-play, and soon it turned into wild slapstick. But Peter sat still as imaginary red hot pans and sizzling marshmallows flew past his hand. He just sat there, camping. He experienced it all. It wouldn't work on stage. But it was perfect for a screened close-up.

For our end-term group presentation, every student had a character part and I spent time working with each, separately.

The character Peter created was of a window wiper who had just survived a 15 floor fall. I asked him how he felt and he replied in the most restrained and polite, barely audible voice: "I feel terrible". I had him tell me everywhere it hurt. (His head, his back, his legs). And make the sound of the pain. By starting close and then gradually going

farther away, putting my hands on my ears and finally closing the door between Peter and myself, he was forced to increase his volume until he reached a good stage level.

That was all he needed. His communication with audience was about the best in the group. His character was hilarious. Best of all, he was aware of how well he was getting through to his classmates."

By Susan, YPT actress: "Noreen. When I listen to my tapes of the early sessions it is very difficult to identify Noreen. Quiet, unassertive, somewhat withdrawn, she seemed always overwhelmed by the more aggressive children. She was always attentive but never chose an active role for herself. Her initial participation was always tentative. It was not until we were well into our final improvisation that I noticed a change. The concept of THE LAST TREE seemed to affect her strongly. She wrote a beautiful story about THE LAST TREE which I found quite impressive. When her team decided to be "the bad guys" who were going to destroy the TREE Noreen flatly refused to do it. She would have no part in destroying a tree, even in fun. No one could persuade her that it was only make-believe. She traded parts with another girl and ended up initially with a non-speaking part and I was afraid she was going to be overwhelmed into silence again. However, as rehearsals progressed I noticed that she had chosen one line to say and invariably said it loud and clear and seemed to relish her moment. At one rehearsal the "interviewer" (one of the characters) had trouble remembering his words and we stopped and started all over again. Finally the "interviewer" left the rehearsal early for an appointment and, desperate for a run-through, I asked Noreen if she could possibly take his place. She went through the whole opening scene almost "word-perfect" (proving just how attentive she had been!) and

earned herself an ovation from the rest of the class. Consequently I changed the opening sequence and for the final performance Noreen shared the "interviewing" and came through beautifully".

As Susan, YPT actress, mentions above, Noreen wrote a story on THE LAST TREE, which grew out of the ecology project, entirely on her own, without any suggestion on any teachers' or actors' part.

I think it is a fitting ending to A THEATRE WORKSHOP at The Kaliski School for Children With Learning Disabilities.

THE LAST TREE

It was the year 1985. I was going to see that trail me and my class used to hike on. I remember when the Appalachian Trail in Englewood Cliffs[#] was a wonderful place. I went back to Englewood Cliffs to see if there are any changes.

But when I went back there were no trees, no flowers, no birds, no small animals running around. There was nothing but dead trees, dead birds, garbage all over the place.

I remember the little school. It was not a school any more. It was turned into a garbage dump. I remember ten years ago me and my classmates used to have fun in that school. Then I walked down to what used to be the Appalachian Trail. I walked down till I found the road where me and my class used to cross.

I saw nothing but cans, bottles, paper and rags all over the road. Then I saw two cops pushing a dead dog off the road.

Then I walked through the trail we used to hike down. I walked through dead trees, dead meadows. I walked through broken glass. Then when I reached the boat basin where me and my class used to picnic it was no longer a boat basin, it was more of a city dump.

I looked at the little waterfall where it used to fall from top down. But the water was black and the air was black.

Noreen and her class frequently visited our New Jersey branch of The Kaliski Schools, at that time in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Then, from far away I saw something standing there. I walked over to see what it is. It was THE LAST TREE IN THE WORLD.

I gathered up my friends and we took the tree away, and we put it somewhere, so people from all over could look at

THE LAST TREE IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD.

Noreen.